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# Newsroom Handbook:

A CONFLICT SENSITIVE APPROACH TO ELECTION REPORTING



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## **Purpose of this handbook**

For all democratic countries, elections provide a vital opportunity for citizens to have a say in who leads them and what policies shape the way in which the society is governed. For countries with histories of deep-rooted violent conflicts, elections are more than a way of choosing between people and political parties. They are a symbol of hope. A public demonstration of a nation's commitment to peace, of the leaders' acknowledgement of the need to be guided by the citizens and the promise of change without violence. These are not small things. For countries that have experienced hostility and civil war, elections are precious and must be protected.

This handbook brings together principles of conflict sensitive journalism with practical strategies for election reporting to explore how media workers can play a role in protecting and promoting free and fair elections. It aims to provide some guidelines that both editors and their journalists can follow as they strategize around ways of reporting on the build-up to elections, what to do on Election Day and how to cover the post-election period.

# Part One:

## Conflict sensitive reporting and elections

### 1.1 Elections and conflict

In many respects elections are a way of dealing with conflict. They allow for the concerns of the greatest number of people to be recognized and ensure that the leaders whom voters trust most have the opportunity to govern. They are a mechanism for bringing about change without violence and of ensuring politicians are accountable to the people.

As long as election processes are respected and trusted they can provide a foundation for a durable peace, but elections are not the solution to everything. It is not surprising that elections are also often accompanied by conflict. For the parties, candidates and voting public, the stakes can be very high. Successful candidates can wield tremendous power, influence society in important ways and make a real difference to people's lives. They also gain access to prestigious employment, special perks and enhanced social status. All prizes worth fighting for.

For voters, elections can mean putting people in power who will prioritize their particular needs and promote the interests of the social groups they belong to and care about. For many this can mean the ethnic, religious, and/or ideological identity groups to which they belong have access to scarce resources and special recognition. The election, for instance, of a gender rights campaigner can mean that issues affecting women are taken more seriously. Similarly, voters will often assume that a politician who belongs to the same ethnic group as them will prioritize their needs over others, even if this should not be the case. Voters are very often committed to political parties they feel represent them and they can take the victories and losses of their political leaders personally. These are some of the reasons why elections can be very tense and affect people at a very emotional level.

The fact that elections are overwhelmingly competitive contributes to tensions. In most elections there can only be one winner. This should not be a problem when candidates and voters respect the process, but where people feel parties, officials or other groups are trying to cheat the system this can certainly lead to increased hostilities. It is here that a conflict sensitive approach to reporting can make a difference.

### 1.2 What do we mean by conflict sensitive reporting?

Conflict sensitive journalism refers to an approach to news coverage in which journalists acknowledge that the way in which they report on conflict can increase tensions or enhance the prospects of peace. Conflict sensitive journalists recognize that news always has an impact. They try to limit the harm news coverage may have, and understand its ability to act as a force for good.

Conflict sensitive journalists do not take sides or try to impose their solutions on the parties, nor will they try to hide the negative aspects of a conflict, or pretend tensions don't exist. Instead, conflict sensitive journalism recognizes that fair, accurate, independent and responsible reporting can help to create the conditions necessary for parties to solve conflicts without resorting to violence. Good, inclusive and in-depth reporting makes a positive difference, whereas one-sided stories, inaccurate or simplistic reports and sensationalized coverage can contribute towards making conflicts more destructive.

Conflict sensitive journalists understand the lesson taught by peacebuilding specialists, that conflicts can only be successfully resolved if the needs and interests of all the parties involved are satisfied to an acceptable level. This lesson is especially important for journalists who belong to groups that are caught up in conflicts because it provides a motivation for ensuring their reporting is fair and unbiased. We can only assist people from our group to escape the destructive consequences of conflict if we help ensure that everyone is taken care of; and, that the needs and interests of all parties are respected and addressed.

### 1.3 What does conflict sensitive journalism do?

There are many ways in which conflict sensitive reporting can play a role in creating the conditions that allow for people to find solutions to conflict. These are some of the more important roles [1].

- Journalists can provide parties in conflict with a channel they can use to communicate with each other about their concerns. By giving all parties a chance to talk about their needs journalists make it possible for people to communicate important messages to each other. This does not mean journalists allow parties to use their media for hurling threats and insults at each other. Rather, it involves asking probing questions that seek to find out what parties need others to know and understand in order for conflicts to be resolved.
- Journalists can provide parties with the information they need to make wise decisions in the way they manage conflicts. During election times this can mean ensuring parties understand the electoral laws so that they can avoid being accused of cheating by the other side.
- Journalists can educate people about different ways in which conflicts can be resolved. This would normally mean providing people with information about conflict management and resolution practices. During election times this could mean explaining that there are legal procedures parties can follow if they have grievances, rather than turning to violence.

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[1] For detailed focus on conflict sensitive reporting see Du Toit, P. 2012. Conflict sensitive reporting: A toolbox for journalists. Published by the Conflict Sensitive Journalism Project at Rhodes University. Available at [https://internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/ConflictSensitiveReporting-Peter\\_du\\_Toit\\_2012-03.pdf](https://internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/ConflictSensitiveReporting-Peter_du_Toit_2012-03.pdf)

- Journalists can empower weaker parties to speak out and be heard. By giving people a platform in the media we ensure that even marginalized groups have a chance to peacefully raise their concerns.
- Journalists can help to reduce tensions by helping to clarify misperceptions. For example: if the member of one political party is assaulted by a group belonging to another this could lead to people assuming that the assailants' party plans to use violence to steal the election. By investigating the case and finding that the vast majority of that party's members favor peaceful election, journalists can play a role in preventing future fights from breaking out.
- Journalists can help to ensure that peacemakers have a chance to be heard. It is normally the most radical and militant people who are most outspoken during times of conflict. These people need to be covered, but we also want to ensure that others, who might be more interested in finding solutions that satisfy everyone, are given a chance to talk.
- Journalists can reduce the danger of conflicts escalating by helping to counteract rumors and speculation. Fearful people will often believe the worst stories even when these are not true, and these beliefs can turn into violent action. Journalists can make a difference by following up on rumors, and alleviating people's fears by publishing the truth.

None of these roles contradict any of the generally accepted norms of good, professional reporting, but they can require that we dig deeper and try to provide coverage that is comprehensive and inclusive. They also require that we, editors and reporters, are constantly reflecting on the impact of our work when it comes to covering conflict. We need to be asking ourselves the following questions:

**Q:** Is the way we are covering a conflict helping to deepen our audience's understanding of the causes of the conflict and of what needs to happen for conflicts to be resolved?

**Q:** Are we being fair in giving all stakeholders affected by a conflict an opportunity to share their views on what needs to happen for this conflict to be resolved?

**Q:** Is the way we are covering a conflict causing people to experience fear and panic that may lead them to respond violently?

**Q:** Is the way we are covering the conflict unnecessarily promoting anger and hatred between groups? Are we using language that will anger and offend different groups? Could we be using terms that are offensive without even knowing it?

**Q:** Are we helping people to see that there are alternatives to violence when it comes to resolving conflict?

**Q:** Are we creating a space where people who want to promote peace can share their experience and knowledge?

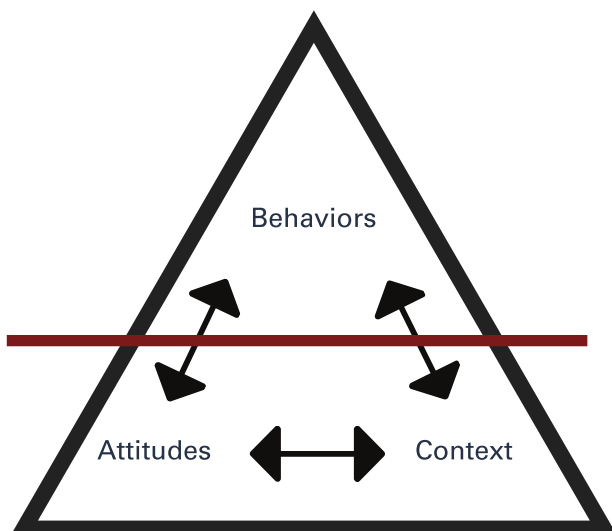
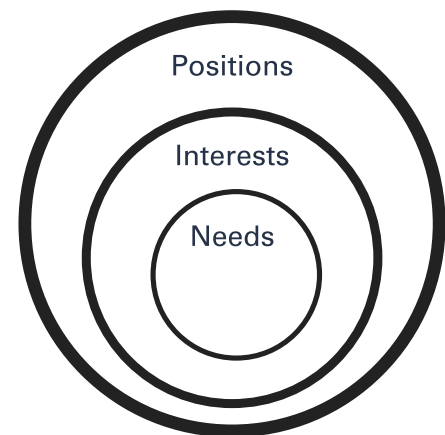
Many of these questions are equally relevant to general principles of good journalism during election times and we will explore these issues in the remainder of this handbook.



## 1.4 Two useful tools for conflict sensitive reporting

One of the underlying assumptions behind conflict sensitive reporting is that the more journalists understand about conflict the better equipped they will be to report on it in knowledgeable and constructive ways. We can enhance our understanding of conflict by engaging with the ideas of scholars who study conflict and peacebuilding and making use of the analytical tools they employ. Two very useful tools for journalists are the Conflict Onion [2] and the ABC Conflict Triangle.

The Conflict Onion provides us with a simple way of thinking about what different parties hope to gain during conflicts. The model shows that groups in conflict will express a range of demands about what they want and how their opponents should behave. These demands reflect the parties' outward positions and are represented by the external layer of the onion. To find out what groups really desire, journalists must peel away the onion's layers to uncover their deeper interests (what they really want) and why these interests are important to them (their needs). By refusing to simply accept the claims that parties make and by asking probing questions journalists can find out more about a party's needs and interests. Getting past positions is important when it comes to explaining conflict. It is also an important aspect of good election coverage.



*Conflict triangle. (Johan Galtung, 1994: 24)*

The second tool, the ABC Conflict Triangle, helps us to address one of the common complaints that is made about the news media – that we focus on what people are doing (their behaviors) without explaining what drives them to act. The model shows that behaviors are the result of two things: the attitudes groups have towards each other and the social and political context people are living with. Media coverage which focuses primarily on behaviors – the visible actions above the line – provides a distorted picture of what is really happening. Conflict sensitive reporting aims to provide a more comprehensive account that answers the critical question of why a conflict started and what is happening in the relationships between the different groups.

[2] The conflict onion is used by many to explain the layers of positions, interest and needs. An example of this usage can be found in Fisher, S., Abdi, D.I., Ludin, J., Smith, R., Williams, S. & Williams, S. 2000. Working with conflict: skills and strategies for action. Responding to conflict. London: Zed Books

By bearing these models in mind while reporting on conflict and elections, journalists can be better prepared to provide audiences with in-depth stories that deepen their understanding of why specific events are taking place.

These models are not just relevant to situations of conflict. They can also be usefully applied when we are covering elections.

## Part Two: The media's role in covering elections

Part One explored how a conflict sensitive approach to reporting can help contribute towards ensuring elections are peaceful. Part Two focuses on the many ways in which the news media are essential to the exercise of free and fair elections. We start with a discussion of what we mean by free and fair elections and then examine some of the most important contributions journalists can make during these times.

### 2.1 What do we mean by free and fair elections?

The most critical feature of any election is that the final results must reflect the will of the people. For this to happen it must be possible for every adult in the voting area to cast their vote according to their own belief of what is right. This means, amongst other things, that people must be able to:

- register to vote in the area where they live;
- access information from the media and other sources that enables them to make informed choices;
- vote without intimidation or being subject to external pressures; and,
- vote in secret.

It also means that polling stations must be accessible to voters. No one should have to travel vast distances to reach the polls. On election day the voting stations should be open for long enough to allow each voter to cast their ballot. There should be enough polling stations to prevent people from waiting in excessively long queues<sup>[3]</sup>.

Free and fair elections also mean that all citizens have a right to participate in the governance of their country and to have an equal opportunity to put themselves forward as candidates. They have the right to join together as members of a political party and to work with others in campaigning.

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[3] This is especially important in a time when the Covid-19 virus is spreading through communities.

The internationally recognized Inter-Parliamentary Union's declaration on the criteria for free and fair elections<sup>[4]</sup> stipulates that, among other things, candidates have a right to:

- express political opinions without interference;
- move freely within a country or constituency to campaign for election;
- campaign on an equal basis with other political parties, including the party forming the existing government;
- have an equal opportunity to access the media to put forward their political views;
- campaign freely without threats to security with respect to their lives and property; and,
- approach the courts or other competent authorities if their rights are interfered with.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union's declaration also summarizes the key responsibilities of states when it comes to elections. States are expected to do the following:

- establish an effective, impartial and non-discriminatory procedure for the registration of voters;
- establish clear criteria for the registration of voters, such as age, citizenship and residence, and ensure that such provisions are applied without distinction of any kind;
- provide for the formation and free functioning of political parties, possibly regulate the funding of political parties and electoral campaigns, ensure the separation of party and State, and establish the conditions for competition in legislative elections on an equitable basis; and,
- initiate or facilitate national programs of civic education, to ensure that the population is familiar with election procedures and issues.

States must also<sup>[5]</sup>:

- ensure those responsible for the various aspects of the election are trained and act impartially, and that coherent voting procedures are established and made known to the voting public;
- ensure the registration of voters, updating of electoral rolls and balloting procedures, with the assistance of national and international observers as appropriate;
- encourage parties, candidates and the media to accept and adopt a Code of Conduct to govern the election campaign and the polling period;
- ensure the integrity of the ballot through appropriate measures to prevent multiple voting or voting by those not entitled thereto;
- ensure the integrity of the process for counting votes; and,
- take the necessary steps to ensure that parties, candidates and supporters enjoy equal security and prevent election violence.

If all of these requirements are met then elections can be said to be free and fair and the government that is elected through this process can be seen to have legitimacy.

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[4] Intern-Parliamentary Union. 1994. Declaration on criteria for free and fair elections. Available at: <https://www.ipu.org/our-impact/strong-parliaments/setting-standards/declaration-criteria-free-and-fair-elections>

[5] Ibid.



## 2.2 Journalists' roles in elections

What follows is a list of seven of the most essential roles the media can play in ensuring that citizens do get to make informed choices when they go to the polls and that elections are free and fair [6].

### **Journalists can educate voters on how to exercise their democratic rights.**

The state, usually through the electoral commission, is responsible for ensuring voters understand what they need to do to be able to vote and how to vote, but it cannot do this by itself. Journalists can make an important contribution by ensuring that voters know how to register as voters, when they must register, and what they need to do on election day.

Journalists can also monitor the election commission to ensure it is fulfilling its mandate when it comes to voter education.

### **Journalists can keep voters updated about developments during the election campaign.**

This involves ensuring voters know whether the campaigning process is peaceful, where the key events are happening and what the different parties or candidates are doing to try and win over the electorate.

### **Journalists can provide a platform for candidates to communicate their messages to voters.**

By reporting on what candidates have to say during their campaign rallies, during interviews and in their manifestos, journalists enable parties to get their messages to voters.

### **Journalists can enable the public to communicate their concerns, opinions, and needs.**

Journalists want to ensure that politicians are not the only people whose voices get heard during an election and need to spend time engaging with citizens to enable ordinary people to raise their concerns with the parties, candidates, election officials and the government.

### **Journalists make it possible for parties and candidates to debate each other.**

There are times when broadcast journalists can bring parties together to debate each other in the same space, but it's more common for these debates to happen in various places over time. By asking candidates to respond to statements and opinions expressed by their opponents, journalists can facilitate an ongoing debate and exchange of ideas.

### **Journalists are watchdogs who monitor the electoral process to expose dishonesty.**

By monitoring electoral processes and reporting on breaches of electoral law, journalists play an important role in ensuring elections are transparent and fair. The electoral commissions can only monitor so much. They need the help of other bodies, including the news media, to monitor and report on illegal activities.

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[6] See South African National Editors Forum. 2019 Elections Handbook for Journalists. Available: <http://sanef.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/190226-SANEF-South-Africa-Elections-2019-Handbook-for-Journalists.pdf>

**Journalists ensure that election results are timeously announced.**

Journalists know that people want to get the elections results as early as possible. They also know that releasing results prematurely can cause chaos if mistakes have been made.

Journalists monitor the counting process, ask questions about delays that might cause people to get suspicious and publicize the results as soon as they have been officially confirmed.

In addition to these roles, journalists will recognize that the election of political leaders is just one step in the democratic cycle. Once the elections are over, journalists need to hold political leaders accountable for their own promises and campaign commitments. This means keeping a careful record of what candidates and parties promise so that they can be asked to report back to voters on what they have achieved. We have a vital role to play in ensuring that leaders do not think they can promise voters the world, only to ignore these promises once the election is over.

The most critical thing in covering elections is for journalists to recognize that we exist to serve our audiences. To ensure that they can make informed choices in a process that is free and fair. As one election reporting handbook [7] has noted, we need to remember that during an election it is the voters who are in charge. Election officials are the “temporary hired help” and elections campaigns can be treated as the “politician’s job application”. It’s up to the candidates to demonstrate to their potential future employers, the citizens, whether they have what it takes to be appointed to the job. The media’s role is to help with job interviews, to interrogate the applicants, check their references and monitor their behaviors.

Part Three of this handbook focuses on some ways in which journalists can perform these roles at different stages in the electoral process.

## 2.3 Building credibility

The most critical asset any journalist or media house has is credibility. If people don’t trust us to get stories right or to cover elections without bias then our ability to play any meaningful role during an election will be harmed. The following questions can serve as a checklist in assessing whether our approach to journalism is compromised.

**Is our reporting fair?**

Are we giving all of the parties a fair opportunity to communicate their policies and ideas to the electorate? Have we made sure that smaller parties or less well-known candidates are also given a chance to share their policies with voters? Are we allowing parties to explain their positions when they are accused of election fraud and dishonest practices?

Have we been fair to our audiences by ensuring they have all the information they need to make an informed choice? Will our reporting enable them to vote wisely and in their own best interests?

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[6] See South African National Editors Forum. 2019 Elections Handbook for Journalists. Available: <http://sanef.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/190226-SANEF-South-Africa-Elections-2019-Handbook-for-Journalists.pdf>

[7] Media Helping Media. 2012. Planning tips for effective election coverage. Available: <https://news.trust.org/item/20120706101600-r9ecf/>

### Is our reporting accurate?

Are we certain we have got our facts straight? Can we back up what we say in our reports? Are we sure the information given to us by sources is correct and have we tried ways of double checking this information? Being accurate does not mean simply reporting what others have said. We need to, as far as possible, be able to verify that our reports are true. The following questions can help us in assessing whether we can rely on information from a source.

- **Is the source credible?** Does the source know enough to be able to speak authoritatively on the issue?
- **Does the source have a vested interest in the issue?** Could the source be manipulating information to suit his or her own hidden agenda? This is especially likely during election times.
- **Are there independent sources we can get this information from?**
- **Would a variety of sources say the same thing?**

It's important to remember that even seemingly small things, such as the spelling of people's names, can impact on our credibility. Audiences are likely to think that if we can't get the small things right, we cannot be trusted with more important information.

### Is our coverage independent?

Are we trying to serve the interests of our audiences or to satisfy other role-players in the election? Audiences will be quick to pick up on whether our media is backing one or other of the parties or candidates and this will impact on the extent to which we are trusted.

Have we accepted money or other gifts from candidates, parties or other people linked to the election? There are always strings attached to gifts and whatever people might say they will expect something in return. If people find out that a journalist has been receiving bribes this will impact dramatically on his or her credibility and on the credibility of the media organization.

### Is our reporting responsible?

It's possible to attract large audiences with dramatic headlines and sensational stories, but we need to be conscious of the impact of these stories on our audiences and on the election process. Overdramatizing stories during closely-fought elections can contribute to heightened tensions and conflicts. If, overtime, audiences realize that journalists are exaggerating stories to increase their audiences they are likely to stop trusting us and to look elsewhere for more reliable information. Not only can irresponsible reporting cost us readers and viewers in the long run, it can also impact on the prospect of peaceful elections.

## Part Three: Covering Elections

Given the important roles the news media has to play in covering elections, it is vital for editors and journalists to start the process of planning their election coverage strategy well in advance. In Part Three we discuss some of the key issues that should be considered.

For practical planning purposes the election process can be divided into four phases, each of which requires a different approach to planning and preparation from editors and journalists. These phases include:

- the pre-election phase;
- the campaign phase;
- election day; and,
- the post-election election period, during which votes are counted and the results are announced.

This process of planning the election coverage should not be left to the editors but should involve all of the newsroom staff because everyone will have different insights to share. It's possible, for instance, that younger members of staff will have far deeper insights into how social media may influence the election than more senior editors who are less familiar with these technologies.

## 3.1 The pre-election phase

This is the phase of the election during which the parties nominate their candidates and the electoral authorities begin preparing the voters role. It is also the time when parties, electoral officials and media organizations agree to and sign codes of conduct that spell out how they will behave in the run-up to the elections. These are some of the steps newsrooms can take during this time as they prepare to cover the elections.

### 3.1.1 Assign roles

Media houses need to make decisions about which staff members will be primarily responsible for covering the elections. This is a significant responsibility and, if the newsroom is big enough, it should be shared between a number of people who form the organization's election team. This team will take the lead in covering the election, but, as voting day draws closer and interest in the elections grows, it is likely that all members of staff will need to get involved. The main election reporters will need to play a leadership role in the newsroom, helping the editor to make decisions about which events must be covered and who should cover them. It's important to ensure that the journalists tasked with spearheading a media house's election coverage have credibility with the parties, are able to deal with important election officials and are interested in ensuring all parties can compete freely and fairly.

### 3.1.2 Commit to regular meetings

It's common for newsrooms to have regular meetings during which reporters update editors on the stories they are covering and editors assign stories to reporters. These meeting become especially important during the buildup to elections, during the campaign period and as newsrooms prepare for election day. They should provide a space where people can share their observations about what is happening on the ground and about how elections are progressing; a space where people identify potential problems with the electoral processes and whether there are tensions developing between supporters of different parties that could become hostile. While journalists are always under pressure, these meetings should also be used as creative spaces where reporters and editors share ideas about interesting ways of telling election stories.

These meetings will tend to focus on the stories that are unfolding on the day, but some time should also be allocated to looking ahead and planning for predictable events. Elections happen according to timetables which allow us to anticipate when special events will happen. For instance, if we know when the last day of voter registration will take place, we might be able to organize an interview with the last voter to register. If we know the deadline for the nomination of candidates, we can prepare a feature in advance for that day that introduces all of the candidates to the electorate and outlines their most important policies.

We also need to hold regular post-mortem meetings in which we critically evaluate our own performance in covering the elections and consider ways in which we can do better. These are some of the questions we want to ask during these meetings:

- Are we missing out on stories that other media are getting?
- Are we being led by the politicians or are we setting our own agenda?
- Are we being fair to all the candidates?
- Are we making mistakes? If so, are these being corrected?
- Are we covering stories in sufficient depth?
- Have we done enough to educate voters about the electoral process?
- Are we neglecting different groups within our community?
- Are we covering the elections in ways which will interest our audiences and hold their attention? This last point does not suggest we should sensationalize stories, but rather that we should think about interesting and creative ways of telling these stories.

Post-mortem meetings should not just involve editors criticizing reporters, they should also be spaces where staff can give each other feedback and contribute towards each other's development.

### **3.1.3 Make sure staff are familiar with electoral laws**

It's important to ensure that all members of the newsroom staff are familiar with the electoral laws. Ideally editors should insist that every journalist, sub-editor, camera operator and producer has studied the legislation and understands the fine points. If journalists are to play a watchdog role during the election process then it's crucial for every member of staff to be able to identify when parties or officials are breaking these laws. We may not expect a football correspondent to write about elections, but they should know that vote buying is illegal and, if they hear of cases where this is happening, to be able to pass this information on to the editor or the main political writers for follow-up. Editors should consider holding workshops with their staff in which they discuss the electoral laws with their reporters.

### **3.1.4 Develop profiles on candidates**

As soon as it is clear who will be standing in the elections we need to assign journalist the task of finding out as much as they can about these candidates. What is their standing within their own parties? Who is supporting them? What are their positions in relation to key issues affecting their constituencies? Have they been caught up in any illegal or untoward activities? Have they stood in previous elections and how did they do? It's also important to get good quality photographs of all of the candidates.



### **3.1.5 Update contact books**

This is also a critical time for journalists to make sure that their contact books are up to date. Journalists need to make sure they have contact details for all of the candidates, including after-hours numbers, and numbers for the political parties' spokespeople. They will also need contact details for the election officials, emergency services and other election observers. Journalists should start building relationships with these people as early as possible during the election process. These contact details should be shared with the editor.

### **3.1.6 Publicize codes of ethics**

It's common for parties, election officials and the media to agree to and sign codes of conduct in which they specify how they will contribute to free and fair elections. It's important for journalists to be familiar with these documents so that we can use them to hold signatories accountable to their commitments. These codes should be widely publicized so that citizens are aware of what the parties have committed to.

It's also clearly important for journalists to be familiar with any codes that govern how they should conduct themselves during elections.

### **3.1.7 Decide on how you will use social media during the election**

Every media organization needs to have a social media presence and it's critical for newsrooms to make careful decisions about how they will use these platforms.

We know that ordinary people rush to post stories on social media whenever a dramatic event takes place, and their reports are often unchecked, emotional and inaccurate. Faced with a real crisis people will not wait for our 9pm bulletin or tomorrow's paper. They will base their decisions, and often their actions, on what they read on social media. This can sometimes be dangerous.

Journalists need to be active on social media platforms providing people with accurate and timely information they can trust. This can mean countering false claims made by others on social media and letting audiences know what has yet to be confirmed about a crisis. If we are seen as credible by audiences then our presence on social media networks can offer people a point of stability and help to calm a tense situation. By letting people know we are aware of the crisis and that we will update them as soon as we have more information, we can help to reduce tensions and panic. People who trust us may wait to hear what we have to say about the situation. What's key is that we do not give up on our journalistic standards of fairness, accuracy and responsibility when reporting on social media.

It's also important for media houses to talk about the journalists' personal profiles on social media. Reporters and presenters have public profiles and what they say on social media can reflect on the media organizations they work for. If a journalist makes biased and derogatory remarks about a candidate on his or her own account, this comment may well be seen to represent the views of the media house. This will also impact on that particular reporter's ability to work with the party that has been criticized. This is an issue that needs to be carefully discussed in newsrooms.

### **3.1.8 Introduce candidates to the voters**

Towards the end of the pre-election phase it should be clear which candidates the different parties are putting forward and whether others are standing as independents. This is a good time to



prepare profiles on these candidates and to begin giving voters an idea of who they will be able to choose between on voting day.

### **3.1.9 Educate voters about electoral processes**

The pre-election phase is also a time when we should begin educating voters about the electoral regulations and processes. First-time voters need to know where and how they should go about registering. They also need to know the processes they must follow on election day. This includes knowing the locations of voting stations, whether or not they can wear party colors when coming to vote and what they need to bring with them. The actual locations of the polling stations may only be announced a few weeks before election day.

It's also important to make clear to people what the law says about interfering with other parties' campaigns and what penalties they may face in breaching electoral laws. Similarly, people need to know what the law says about accepting payments to vote for particular parties. These are all behaviors that could cause conflict and which might prejudice the elections. One way of preventing these practices is to educate citizens so they know what they can do and who they can turn to if they have complaints about the ways in which parties and their supporters are behaving.

## **3.2 The campaign phase**

This is the time when parties and candidates try to convince voters to put their faith in them on election day. It's a time when they will work hard to try set the agenda and shape how journalists report on their activities and policies. We will want to cover the issues that the parties identify as important, but we do not want to be limited by what they say. Our primary interest is to represent voters and to find out how candidates plan to satisfy their needs. This can mean asking difficult questions of candidates which they may not want to respond to — especially likely when it comes to incumbent candidates who have failed to live up to voters' expectations.

Here we will focus on some of strategies journalists should adopt when covering political campaigns.

### **3.2.1 Reporting campaign rallies and meetings**

Political reporters will spend much of their time covering rallies and meetings where parties try to win over voters with their promises and policies. Candidates will use these platforms to sell their achievements, promote their most popular policies and run down their opponents. We need to report on these statements, but should not leave it there. When candidates attack their opponents, we need to give the people being attacked a chance to respond to the criticisms and accusations by following up with them after the rallies.

Parties will often provide journalists with copies of their speeches before presenting these at rallies. This does not mean we can simply work from the pre-prepared speech. Speakers often deviate from their notes and we need to be there to pick up when this happens.

In addition to focusing on what the candidates have to say we also want to provide an accurate portrayal of the event. How many people attended? Where did they come from? Is there evidence

of large numbers of supporters having been bussed in to swell the crowds? Have people attending the rallies been given food, t-shirts and other inducements to be there? All of these things help to paint a picture of how much support the candidate has. We also want to engage with the people attending the rally to find out how they feel about the issues addressed by the candidates. Are these the issues they are concerned about? We also want to know how the leaders of other parties have responded to the candidates' speeches.

### **3.2.2 The people's voice**

Elections must ultimately be about ensuring that voters get to choose the people they think will best take care of their needs. For this to happen, candidates cannot be allowed to dictate the agenda themselves; they must be asked to respond to the concerns of the people. But how do we do this? Journalists need to be creative in finding ways of ensuring that ordinary people get to raise their concerns during elections and that politicians respond to their very real needs. The following are some of the strategies journalists can use to give voters a voice.

- Identify a wide range of community leaders and ask them to identify the issues they feel are of most importance to the community. Draw on these lessons to question candidates on how they plan to address people's needs.
- Visit different communities and spend time talking to ordinary people. Ask people what questions they would like to pose to the candidates. Compile a list of the questions that come up most frequently and ask each of the candidates to respond to these. Be sure to visit a cross-section of the community. It's important that journalists visit a diverse range of areas that include the very poor right through to the rich. They also need to be sure to speak to a cross-section of people based on gender and age.
- Put together a panel of citizens and ask them to respond to the promises being made by the candidates. Draw on this discussion to produce stories that show how citizens are responding to different candidates.
- Meet with people who represent different professions and interest groups such as teachers, farmers, fishermen and the unemployed.

The most important thing we can do when it comes to giving citizens a voice is to listen. What are people saying in the market place, when using public transport or drinking at entertainment centers? We need to mingle with a wide variety of people to get a good sense of what people are thinking. Make a point of giving people in different communities your contact details so that they can be in touch if things are happening in their areas that need to be covered.

### **3.2.3 Dealing with inflammatory statements**

In some instances, candidates will speak about their political opponents in ways that are designed to inflame anger against them and their supporters. This language can often be dangerous and promote violence. It is not our job to censor candidates but we do not want to allow them to use our media to promote social unrest. In dealing with these situations we need to report what was said without seeking to sensationalize the stories. Instead we must ensure that people have a chance to react to these comments. We need to give the people who were attacked a chance to respond. We also need to encourage election officials and members of civil society organizations to respond to these kinds of remarks so that they can make it clear what kinds of behaviors are regarded as acceptable.

### 3.2.4 Election interviews

It is seldom easy to interview candidates running for senior positions because they are generally well-prepared and used to dealing with journalists. They will often have been schooled in how to get their own points across while avoiding questions that make them uncomfortable.

Successful interviewing in these situations takes careful preparation. We need to be clear on what questions we want to ask during the interview and which of these are most important. The questions need to be short, simple and direct. If we ask long, complicated or general questions politicians are likely to respond by only answering the parts of the questions that suit them.

Questions must be grounded in the concerns of real people. Ask candidates to talk about how they will respond to specific problems confronting the country and the areas they will be representing. Draw on your engagement with real people with real problems in planning your questions. For instance, you could ask: "How will your health policies address the concerns of Mrs. ABC who lost a baby because the hospital's electricity supply was cut off when she was in labor?"

The key to any interview is to stay in control. Powerful people often feel they can dictate how an interview should go and expect journalists to be compliant. We need to stand our ground and to recognize that we also represent large constituencies. Our audiences are dependent on us for information.

### 3.2.5 Monitoring social media

We can learn a lot about what is happening in an election campaign by monitoring social media platforms. We will learn about important messages from politicians and events that are happening on the ground. We will also be able to get a sense of how different groups on social media feel about candidates and about each other. This should, however, not be our only tool. While more and more people have access to social media, those who comment and post stories cannot be seen as representing the views of the entire community. It's often possible for a few people to dominate a discussion and to make it seem as if an issue is much more important than it actually is.

We need to be aware that people may also use fake accounts to manipulate social media with a view to discrediting candidates or the entire electoral process. It's very difficult to determine whether information provided on social media is coming from a credible source. We will always need to follow-up on any information publicised on social media and to verify this information by dealing with real people.

### 3.2.6 Reporting on opinion polls

There are two kinds of opinion polls that are used during elections. The first is a survey aimed at finding out what issues people in the electorate are concerned about. The second is a survey intended to find out how popular particular parties or candidates are with the electorate. Both can be highly problematic unless they are conducted by skilled, reputable and independent companies. In both instances, these surveys involve asking a small group of people to respond to a set of questions and relying on this group of people to represent a much larger population. Selecting a truly representative sample is a complex process and even small mistakes can result in unreliable results.

Badly designed surveys can paint a distorted picture, while other surveys can be deliberately intended to generate misleading information. A Reporters without Borders election reporting handbook notes that:

A survey can be used for illegitimate purposes that harm the democratic process. The risk of this is especially high in developing democracies where survey firms' practices are rarely subject to any legal oversight. Unscrupulous polling firms may use methodology with built-in biases – e.g. a sample limited to certain regions, questions designed to produce particular answers – in order to produce surveys with the results that their clients demand.[8]

If journalists want to report on surveys then they need to understand the methodology that was employed by the survey company, how many people were interviewed and how these people were selected. We also want to know who paid for the survey. Was it commissioned by one of the parties or by an independent organization? Unless journalists have a strong academic background that focuses on this kind of research they would be well advised to consult with experts about the trustworthiness of the survey before publishing or broadcasting the results. We need to be aware that our audiences often have no idea how these opinion polls are conducted and whether or not they provide an accurate reflection of reality. It's unwise to ever base an article entirely on the results of a survey without inviting political analysts and candidates from the different parties to comment on the results. Even then we should make clear to audiences that surveys must be treated with caution.

### **3.2.7 Form partnerships**

Covering elections can be an expensive business and involve a great deal of travel. Journalists should look out for opportunities to partner with other media houses in covering the election campaign. We don't have to work with our direct competitors, but there is no reason why a weekly newspaper should not work with a radio station, or why two community radio stations serving different audiences cannot cooperate. By agreeing to share stories or transport costs media houses can greatly expand their reach during elections, leading to enhanced content and a better service to our audiences.

### **3.2.8 Monitor whether parties are complying with election rules**

Throughout the campaign period we want to monitor the actions of the candidates and parties to ensure they are abiding by the rules. Some of the possible breaches we should be looking out for would include the following: excessive spending,[9] threatening opponents, bribing voters to support a particular party and publishing defamatory statements about candidates. In all cases we want to be systematic in gathering evidence and collecting statements from people who are making accusations. We also need to approach the election officials for comment on these stories and to give the parties accused of breaches the right to comment on allegations made against them.

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[8] Reporters without Borders. 2015. Handbook for Journalists During Elections Available at [https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/handbook\\_for\\_journalists\\_during\\_elections.pdf](https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/handbook_for_journalists_during_elections.pdf)

[9] The election laws in Liberia place limits on how much parties can spend on their election campaigns.

### 3.2.9 Monitor election authorities

Electoral regulations are designed to ensure that all parties have an equal chance of succeeding in the elections. These laws prescribe that officials may not favor one party over another and stipulate that officials may not belong to political parties. Journalists need to be intimately familiar with these rules so that we can pick up on situations where officials may be misusing their positions to the advantage of one of the parties.

While we need to report on instances where elections officials are abusing their powers, we also want to be extremely cautious in covering these stories. Parties that are frustrated with their progress in winning over voters will often make allegations that are designed to challenge the legitimacy of an election. In all cases, election bodies must be given an opportunity to respond to any allegations that are made against them or their staff members.

## 3.3 Election Day

The actual day of the election will always be a frenzy of activity and we need to accept that we cannot possibly be everywhere. We need to strategize carefully about how to make the best use of our human and technical resources.

### 3.3.1 Preparing for election day

Some of the key questions will include: How many reporters will we have on the day? How will they move between the polling stations? Do they have cars? Do we have budget to hire a couple of drivers for the day? How many cameras do we have and where will they be needed? How will journalists communicate with the newsroom? Can they file their stories from the field? How many journalists do we need to keep back in the newsroom to answer phones and follow-up on breaking stories? Who will be monitoring the chatter on social media for stories and indications that there may be problems?

It can be worthwhile for editors to meet with a team of experienced journalists to brainstorm around these issues. The team should start meeting at least a month before the election day and continue meeting as the day draws closer. The more we do in advance the easier it will be on the day.








### 3.3.2 A checklist for reporters preparing to go into the field

We need to ensure that reporters who are on the ground on election day have been properly briefed on what they are expected to do and where they must go. Editors should know what stories they are expecting from these reporters and how their stories will fit in with the media house's overall strategy for covering the election. The following are some questions journalists should ask themselves before election day arrives:



- Do I have a list of the locations of all of the polling stations?
- Will I be able to get to any of them if required?



-  Am I clear on when polling stations must open and close?
-  Do I know who will be authorized to speak to journalists on the day?  
Have I got contact numbers for these people?
-  Do I know when and where the candidates plan to vote?
-  Am I familiar with the regulations relating to what people and parties can do on election day?
-  Am I clear on the rules that govern what journalists can and cannot do when visiting polling stations?
-  Will I be able to visit a diversity of areas to get a representative picture of how the election is being experienced by citizens from different walks of life?
-  Have I given some thought to the different kinds of human interest stories I might be able to gather? Examples might include conducting interviews with first-time voters about their experiences or asking voters with disabilities about the challenges they may have faced in casting their ballots.

### 3.3.3 Some stories to look out for on election day

While election day is usually a frantic time it is often quite simple to predict what the main stories will be. These are some of the stories we should be looking out for.



What was the weather like? Could rain have discouraged some people from voting?



Were people campaigning inside the polling area?

Were they displaying party colors or wearing political t-shirts?



Did the polling stations open and close on time?



Did the voting process progress smoothly at all of the stations?

If not, what were the difficulties?

How long were the queues?

How long did it take for people to vote?



Did the polling stations make special allowances for the elderly or people with disabilities?



Was anyone prevented from voting? Why?



Did anyone interfere with a voter's right to a secret ballot?





Were the stations equipped with enough ballot papers?



Did the election officials encounter anyone trying to cheat?



What was the atmosphere like at the different voting stations?



Did anything out of the ordinary happen at any of the polling stations?



Were there any disruptions at polling stations?

What caused these?

Did they interfere with people's right to vote?



Is there evidence of party members harassing voters at or on their way to the polls?



Was there sufficient security at each of the polling stations?



Were all of the procedures prescribed in legislation carried out at the different polling stations?



Were voters allowed to leave work in order to cast their votes?

## 3.4 The post-election period

The period between when polling stations close and election results are announced can be tense, and journalists need to be careful about how they report on developments. It's a time when people will often speculate wildly about the results and when political parties and candidates will frequently claim victories before these are formally announced — often even before counting is concluded. This can be a dangerous time and journalists need to ensure we do not fuel expectations that might be dashed when results are released.

### 3.4.1 Keeping things calm

It's important for candidates, parties and voters to have reasonable expectations of when results can be released. For journalists, this means continually liaising with electoral officials to find out if the counting process is running smoothly and when final results may be expected. This information needs to be conveyed to our audiences. We also need to find out if there might be any delays and what the causes of these delays could be. Delays in the counting process can make people suspicious, which can raise the level of tension. Audiences need to know that we are constantly monitoring the process.

### 3.4.2 Announcing the results

There is only one result that really matters in an election and that is the final result officially proclaimed by the electoral commission. Any interim results need to be treated with caution and should only be reported on if they are verified by the commission. In these instances journalists must make it absolutely clear that these are only partial results and that the final

outcome of the election is still undecided. It is critical in these instances that journalists adhere to the rules governing the announcing of results.

### 3.4.3 Dealing with exit polls

In some elections, political parties and other organizations conduct interviews with voters as they exit the polling stations to get an early picture of what the results may be. These surveys are unreliable because the interviewers have no way of checking whether voters are being honest about who they voted for. There is no real benefit to the public in publishing this information and it is generally wiser for journalists to wait for the official results.

### 3.4.4 Dealing with complaints

It's common for disappointed candidates to accuse their opponents, the electoral officials and the government of cheating. Journalists need to take these accusations seriously.

Accusations of electoral fraud and vote-rigging can call the integrity of our elections into question and threaten our democracies. Parties that make these statements must be willing to back them up with real proof. There are specific processes that parties need to follow if they plan to contest the results and we want to know whether parties intend to exercise their rights to take these steps. If not, then we should treat what they have to say with caution.

## 3.5 What next?

Once the results have been announced and accepted the democratic cycle begins anew. The newly-elected leaders will be inaugurated and take up their seats and begin, or continue, to govern. Our roles as journalists will not change. We will keep track of their progress and monitor whether they are living up to the promises they made during their campaigns. We will continue to form a bridge between citizens and their leaders, asking difficult questions on behalf of our audiences and demanding answers. We will continue in our role as watchdogs, keeping a watchful eye on politicians, ready to expose corrupt or abusive behavior if necessary. We also continue to educate the public about political processes so that they can work with us in trying to ensure our elected officials remain servants of our society.

## Part Four: Personal Security<sup>[10]</sup>

The competitive nature of elections means that campaigns can often be very tense affairs in which parties and supporters are constantly provoking each other. Violence is always a possibility and reporters need to be prepared to make decisions about their own safety without much notice.

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[10] Adapted from see Du Toit, P. 2012. *Conflict sensitive reporting: A toolbox for journalists*.

Here are some ideas to consider when we prepare ourselves for situations that might turn violent. The first is probably the most important.



It's your choice. No editor or employer has the right to force you to go into a situation where you feel your life may be in danger. Reporters without Borders' *Charter for the Safety of Journalists Working in War Zones and Dangerous Areas* states that journalists should "have the right to refuse ... an assignment without explanation and without there being any finding of unprofessional conduct". The journalist will always be the best-placed person to evaluate the situation and to decide where he or she is able and equipped to manage the potential threats.



If you are going into a volatile situation let your news desk know where you are going and when you plan to be back. Keep the desk updated if you change your plans. This is important because your colleagues may be able to organize help for you if you fail to check in at appointed times. However, their ability to do anything for you will be greatly hampered if you do not keep them updated about your movements. Things can move very fast when violence breaks out and you can find that you've moved a long way in a short time while tracking violent confrontations.



Be conscious of how people are responding to the news media. In some instances journalists are made to feel welcome, often because people feel authorities may act with more restraint if the media is present. In others people may be very antagonistic. Read the signs. Be very careful if there is an overwhelming sense of negativity towards the media. People in crowds will often commit acts they would never contemplate as individuals.



Carry accreditation with you, but use your judgement about whether to display it or not.



If you do run into trouble it can be helpful to be able to say that you know the leaders of parties involved in a confrontation. Having their numbers on your mobile phone and being able to call these people can often get you out of a threatening situation. You will also want to have the contact numbers for police and other security agencies operating in the area in case you run into trouble with government agencies.



Familiarise yourself with the terrain and plan how, if things get too volatile, you will make your escape. Establish at least one backup escape route in case your first option is blocked. Update your escape options as you move from one spot to the next and be conscious of how the situation may be changing around you.



Stay with other journalists. We may be competing with each other, but there are times when we need to put our rivalry aside and work together.



Set up Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp groups that include reporters from as many different media as possible. Use this groups to send warnings to colleagues about potential dangers and when you might need help getting out of difficult situations. Journalists need to stand together during difficult times.



Pay attention to the advice of people living in the area. If these people suggest that you might be in danger take this advice seriously.



Dress appropriately. Avoid wearing colours that might be associated with the different parties. Never wear political t-shirts and avoid wearing clothes that could be mistaken for police and military uniforms. All of these outfits could set you up as a target. Wear shoes you can run in. Clothes made from natural fibres (such as cotton or wool) are less flammable and safer to wear.



Never carry a weapon. People will always be deeply suspicious of a journalist carrying a firearm.



Carry a small backpack that includes your equipment, a basic first aid kit, water, snacks, a backup power bank for your phone, and a flashlight. If trouble breaks out in an isolated area it may be some time before you can return to the office.



A clear head is your most important survival tool. Rather withdraw too early than too late.



Control your temper and never react violently to verbal or physical provocation.



Prepare a card with the following information on it and keep this on you whenever you are in the field:

- Your full name and the organization you work for.
- Contact numbers people should use if something happens to you.
- Your blood group.
- Information about any medicines and drugs you may be allergic to.



Get and stay physically fit. You never know when you might need to run to keep up with a fast moving demonstration or to get away from a violent confrontation. Keeping physically fit can also help us to cope with the stress that comes with the job.

It is important that journalists do not accept that attacks on members of the media are simply one of the hazards of the job. We have a responsibility to ourselves and our colleagues to take action when we are subjected to abuse and attacks. These should always be reported to the appropriate authorities and charges should be laid against attackers.



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